

In the top right hand corner of the picture is a depiction of the Buddha pointing toward the “Hare in the Moon.” Indian culture saw a hare rather than a man in the moon (as do many other cultural traditions).

This is one of the hints within this iconography that there is a way out of this seemingly unending vast world; which has its pleasures but much suffering and no lasting satisfaction.

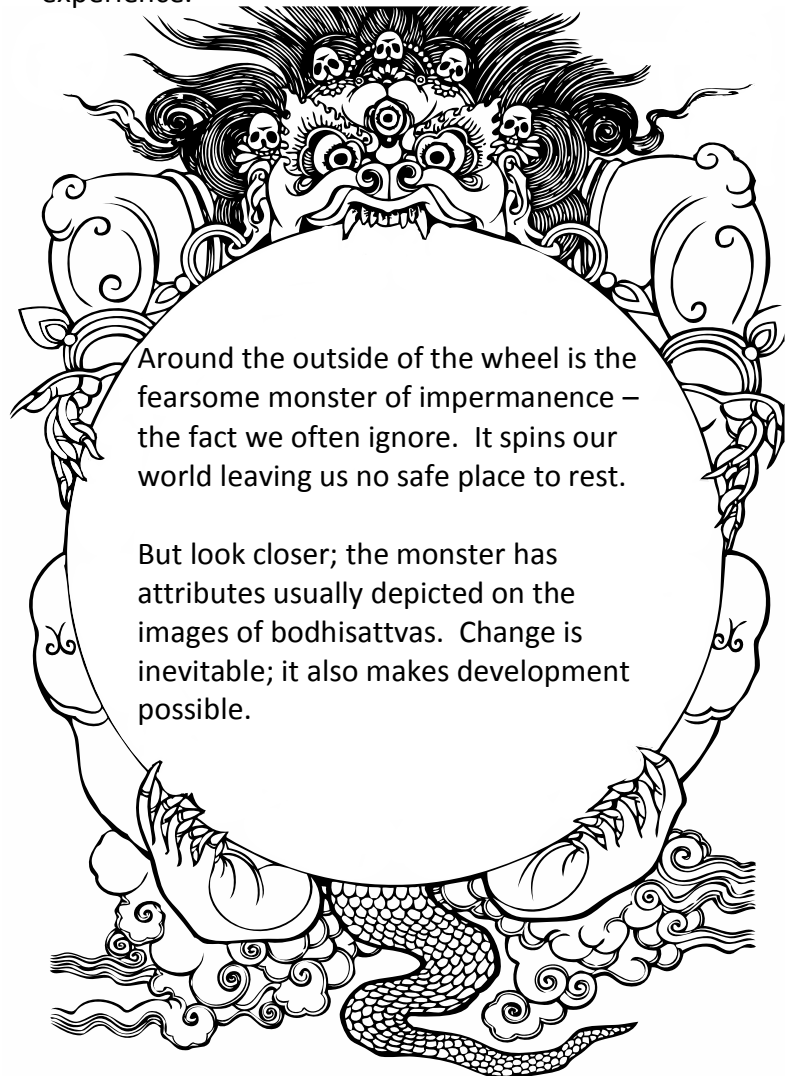
According to a Jataka tale: in a former life *‘the Buddha to be’* sacrificed his life as a hare by jumping into a fire to feed a hungry travelling ascetic. Non-selfishness is the way pointed to by the Buddha - the way to more satisfying realms of experience.

The “Wheel of Life” is more correctly called the Bhavachakra or “Wheel of Becoming.” Another important wheel symbol is the Dharmachakra (pictured to the right). This wheel (**Dharmachakra** Sanskrit or **Dhammachakka** Pali) has eight spokes symbolizing the eight limbs of The Noble Eight Fold Path.

“The Wheel of Life” is an image from Tibetan culture. Murals or wall hangings depicting this image are often found in the entrance to temples. It summarizes in pictorial form many teachings.

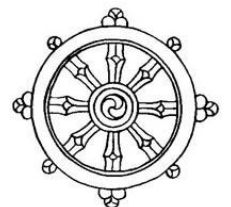
One way of looking at it is as a mirror. This is us! We could say: this is our world, our experience; the experience of the unenlightened, the conditioned world.

Often we only see bits of the picture or only identify with certain aspects of experience. The image can help us to map the territory: to get a broad overview of our current and potential experience.



Around the outside of the wheel is the fearsome monster of impermanence – the fact we often ignore. It spins our world leaving us no safe place to rest.

But look closer; the monster has attributes usually depicted on the images of bodhisattvas. Change is inevitable; it also makes development possible.





## The Wheel, the Spiral and the Mandala: #2



As with most vehicles the hub of the wheel is where the motive force that turns the wheel is applied and this too is the case with the Wheel of Life. The figures of the cock, the snake and the pig represent respectively the 'three poisons' or 'three unwholesome roots' of greed, hatred and ignorance.

As human beings we have self-awareness in a way that animals do not have, this is a very fine thing but it can also be the cause of much suffering as we attempt to maintain and bolster our sense of self, our ego, by mis-applying the same reflexes that we need for physical well-being.

This is not to say that we do not need a healthy, positive sense of self and to care for ourselves, rather that healthy reflexes can become neurotic, unhealthy and the cause of suffering. For example, if we unconsciously measure our sense of self by material status then our lives will revolve around a hunger that will be frustrating and ultimately unsatisfying, a neurotic craving rather than a healthy gathering of what we need.



There are of course many other examples such as unhealthy cravings for food, drink, sex, the perfect partner, the ultimate career and so on. In all such instances we are looking for external sources for our sense of fulfilment, of purpose, of who we are or for something to simply make us feel good. It's as if we have a void within us that we are trying to fill with all these things, or maybe a fear or unhappiness that we are trying to obscure.

It should be emphasised that the cock does not represent healthy desires, Buddhist practice is not about attaining some cold, desireless state, rather it is concerned with discerning the healthy from the unhealthy, the skilful from the unskilful, the fulfilling from the frustrating and in so doing reorienting our energies and aspirations.

The opposite of greed is aversion or even hatred, represented by the snake. With aversion we are pushing away that which we do not like, that which threatens our sense of self, be it people, situations or uncomfortable truths. When something or someone thwarts our desires then this aversion can harden into hatred. Sometimes this sense of being prevented from getting what we desire does not even have a basis in reality, we feel we are lacking something and we blame others, typically 'them' or 'they' for somehow depriving us.

The third of the animals within the hub is the pig, representing ignorance, it has been suggested that an ostrich with its head in the sand would be equally appropriate as the sense here is that of ignore-ance, a wilful turning away from the realities of life, distracting ourselves. Deep down, we know that pulling some things towards us and pushing other things away is not the answer, that the world cannot be fixed to suit us, yet still we operate in this way. Partly we do this through conditioning but also because the truth of impermanence is very challenging to all that we hold dear, including our very dearly held sense of self.

Until we are Enlightened, all of us will have a these aspects to our being, no criticism or condemnation is implied in the teaching, rather it is that the causes of suffering have been diagnosed by a kind and loving physician. Our task is, with minds clarified and imbued by positivity through meditation, to observe and slowly come to understand what it is that stops us being content, the underlying subtle currents of our desires and aversions and the stories that we tell ourselves. If we can then begin to slowly untangle the knots that we unwittingly tie ourselves in, we will become increasingly free to experience this precious human existence in its fullness.

### What is Karma?

**Karma** means action. The word is used in other religions in different ways and popular views can also obscure its meaning. When Buddhists use the term it means a volitional action of body, speech of mind. The result of the actions, the consequences, are called **karma- Vipāka**.

Try focusing for a few minutes on a positive action you have performed, maybe something simple like doing the shopping for someone. Relax and tune into your experience. Now think of something you have done with a mean spirit – maybe spoken harshly to someone. Again, relax and tune into your experience. You may have found complications in your experience but if it was reasonably straightforward you will have found an expansive, warm sense of well being with the first and a tensing, hardening with the second (it might be good to dwell on something positive like gratitude to someone now so you leave the more positive and pleasant impression). Our actions affect our world. I can remember hearing of two friends walking through the East End, one experienced it as vibrant, friendly and attractive, whilst the other experienced it as: dark, menacing and to be avoided. Interestingly it wasn't just a state of mind. The one who found it difficult also got into fights on several occasions. Actions have consequences. The quality of our intentions and the extent to which our mind is poisoned by greed, hatred and delusion: or perfumed by generosity, love and wisdom, determines our future experience.

### Karma shown on the wheel

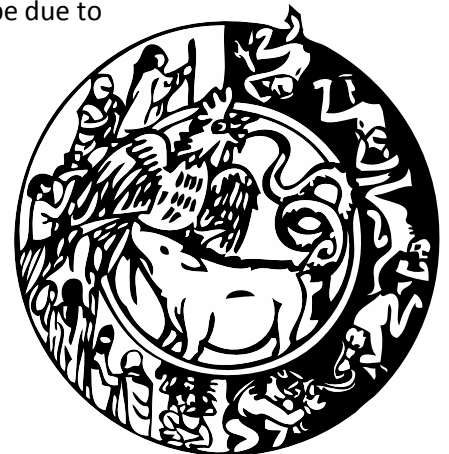
On the wheel of life karma is depicted in several ways. One of them is the ring of dark and light that surrounds the hub of the wheel. Increasingly refined figures on the left ascend in a virtuous ascent. On the right decreasingly brutish figures tumble downwards. Sometimes life can feel like this, we make an effort to 'be good' but unable to maintain our effort we then fall back into egocentric ways and undo our own progress. There is a way beyond this exhausting circling. Acting ethically is imperative, an intellectual and an intuitive understanding of the law of karma is essential but it is only with increasing wisdom that sees beyond the egocentric view of the world that we can move beyond this cycle.

In the Moliya Sivaka Sutta (SN36.21) the Buddha explains that pleasant consequences are not always the direct result of skillful karma and likewise unpleasant ones don't always come from acting unethically. The closest we can get to describing how the universe works is the doctrine of conditioned co-production (**Pratītyasamutpāda**). In the Triratana movement we use a teaching derived from the commentarial tradition to explain the place of karma within the greater principle of conditionality.

### The Five Niyamas

Conditionality can be seen to work on five levels. Consequences due to karma are only due to the fourth of these levels. Reality isn't divided, so a consequence will be brought about not only by many conditions interacting, but conditions from different Niyamas also.

1. Physical or inorganic – if a tsunami kills large numbers of people, this is likely to be due to geological events under the sea, not to the victims' collective karma.
2. Biological – if we get ill in a flu epidemic, this is likely to be due to the arising of a virus we have no resistance against, not to our past actions.
3. Psychological – we may experience mental states that are due to past experiences we had no influence over, and which are not due to our own karmic choices.
4. Karmic – the karma-niyama specifically refers to the effects of ethical and unethical actions that we have some choice about.
5. Dharmic – this is seen as the apparently miraculous and 'undeserved' influence exercised by Enlightened beings; we might relate to this as the compassion of the enlightened.



### Rebirth (not reincarnation)

Another way karma is depicted on the Wheel of Life is in the six realms. These surround the ring of dark and light and represent the rebirths that result from karma. This is the subject we will explore over the next two weeks.

The Buddhist view is not one of a soul being reborn again and again but the conditioning of consciousness in one life conditioning the mind in future lives. As our consciousness determines our being, the worlds we create through our individual and collective perceptions come into being. We may not accept the ancient Indian view of rebirth; but without seeing that our actions and the state of mind that generates them radically informs our perception, to the extent of creating the 'world' we live in (at least in this lifetime); then spiritual progress is impossible.

## The Wheel, the Spiral and the Mandala: #4 the Six Realms part one



We now turn our attention to the six large areas of the image between the hub and inner ring and the outer ring, these are known as the Six Realms or Worlds of Existence. As you can see, these take up a large area of the overall image, and indication that recognition of our own states of being is of great importance.

Top and centre is the God or Deva realm, turning clockwise from that the realm of the Asuras or Jealous Gods, next is the realm of the Pretas or Hungry Ghosts, at the bottom of the wheel is the realm of hell, next the animal realm and lastly we come to the human realm. In a sense the realms can be characterised by the prevalent states of consciousness

The realms of the Gods, Asuras and Humans are known as the Sugati or 'favourable realms' and we'll be looking at those in detail next week. This week we'll be looking at the Dugati or 'unfavourable realms', those of hell, the hungry ghosts and the animals.



We probably need to consider how we regard the idea of the realms or worlds collectively and there are perhaps two main ways which we can do so.

Firstly there is what is probably the most traditional sense in that they are literally worlds or existences into which beings are born as a result of the actions of body, speech and mind (karma) in preceding lives. Although it is not the same individual who is

reborn as in the concept of reincarnation (which would necessitate a fixed-self, something that Buddhism refutes), the conditions established in this life determine the nature of the life that succeeds it - we'll be looking more at this in the weeks that follow.

Secondly there is the sense that these are states of being that we call all experience to some degree or another as part of our human existence, we can become self-absorbed and complacent, intoxicated by success and status, driven by craving and greed, tormented by our mental states or just want to eat, sleep and be left alone at different times in our lives.

Perhaps the most fruitful way of regarding these images is in a way that is balanced between the two. Certainly we can utilise this teaching in our present life but since none of us can know for certain what lies beyond it is probably best to remain open to the concept of re-birth, it certainly can't do any harm to practice with a view to future existences that are favourable to continued practice of the Dharma. It also helps if we are able to allowing these images to speak to us in ways that are not strictly intellectual, there is far, far more to us than intellect alone and as we can observe in human behaviour, these deeper more instinctual parts of ourselves are very powerful.

However we interpret these two viewpoints, what the Wheel of Life is teaching us is how our actions condition our future existence and how we can move away suffering stemming from greed, hatred and delusion and towards a different state of being characterised by wisdom and compassion. On this note, one viewpoint to avoid is the idea that people are suffering in some state or another entirely as a result of their own actions in this or previous lives and that they must somehow deserve their lot.

This certainly not a view imbued with compassion nor does not take account of the Buddhist teaching that there are other processes influencing our lives besides karma, geology, biology and so on. We can never know fully the causes of someone's situation and the only response taught or exemplified by the Buddha is one of kindness and compassion, never judgement and condemnation.

Now to take a look in more detail at each of the Dugati's or unfavourable realms

The realm of the Hungry Ghosts or Pretas is linked to the cockerel, a state where existence is entirely dominated by greed and neurotic craving, where one is locked into a mind-set where acquisition and consumption are seen as the only way to fulfilment and satisfaction, even though we may have acquired and consumed similar things time and time again and not been satisfied by them, sometimes even been poisoned by them, we still persist in this underlying belief. The Hungry Ghosts have tiny mouths making it impossible for them to ever consume enough and that which they do consume turns to fire and blades in their distended empty stomachs. Although we tend to think about this craving in material terms, the underlying motive force is that of egotism, creating an illusory sense of self and self-security through that which we gather around us and consume, either way, materially or psychologically, this is a deluded approach.

The Hell realm is linked to the snake and the overriding states are of hatred and fear. It is quite natural to push away that which is uncomfortable or seems threatening but again these attitudes can harden into powerful tendencies towards hatred and fear within us which poison the way in which we see the world. In fact Buddhism tells us that our states of mind *do* create the world in which we live and this is in a sense what the Hell realm is about, it is not hard to think of human beings who have literally created hell on earth for themselves and for their fellow human beings and indeed non-human beings. Conversely, other exceptional people have been able to operate in a completely different way in the midst of terrible conflict and suffering indicating that the situation does not have to dictate our response to it, we can respond creatively rather than reactively.

The animal realm is all about existing at a dull level where eating, sleeping, sex and maybe in the modern world TV and the internet, are all that we want. Like the pig at the hub of the wheel we have our noses in the trough and our ears hanging down over our eyes severely limiting our vision, as long as the trough contains that which meets our animal needs then that is all that matters. Of course when the trough becomes empty then we are likely to experience the states of mind characterised by the two realms above. The problem with this approach is that we *do* have self-awareness, we *are* human beings with the potential for so much more and even if our material needs are always met we will experience frustration and suffering if our often unexamined and understood aspirations for a more meaningful and fulfilling life are stifled. This somehow feels like a cycle, the more we experience a sense of emptiness, of frustration, the more we are likely to choose to distract and dull our awareness in various ways.

# The Wheel, the Spiral and the Mandala: #5 Sugati



This week we are continuing to look at the six realms. First let's look at the three happier realms at the top of the wheel (Sugati).

### The Human Realm

This is the realm of truly human life. It is characterised by a balance between pleasure and pain. It is a realm where communication is possible, empathy occurs and cooperation can allow culture to evolve. It is in this realm in which arts, science, technology, political organisation and religious life can exist. It is a world in which what has been learnt can be communicated to future generations, so each individual can recapitulate the learning that has gone before. This learning is not just factual knowledge and skills but also values.

The balance between pleasure and pain and the existence of culture, makes a birth in the human realm the most advantageous place for spiritual development. To be human is a very precious blessing and opportunity. It is highly valued in all schools of Buddhism. Learning to fully occupy and value our place in the human realm is an important part of Buddhist practice.

### The Realm of the gods

The realms inhabited by the gods are vast and varied. They stretch from the earthbound sensuous nature spirits to the highest divine beings. These devas, or shining ones, are beings: who through their previous positive actions have accrued merit, have generated a mode of consciousness that is positive to the point of being radiantly blissful. The states they dwell in are ones we have access to through meditation. The life of a god, however enjoyable and long lasting is impermanent. When the positive volitions that propelled the gods into their blissful lives is used up they fall from their privileged position. Sometimes we hear of individuals in our world who appear to live like this. Many do not seem to be happy so they are more likely inhabitants of the next realm.

### The realm of the Jealous Gods

This realm is also called the realm of the Asuras or Titans. The inhabitants of this realm are powerful and have a will to dominate. Traditionally they are pictured as continually making war on the gods to gain possession of the Wish Fulfilling Tree. The psychological equivalent in our world is probably the world of politicians and big business.

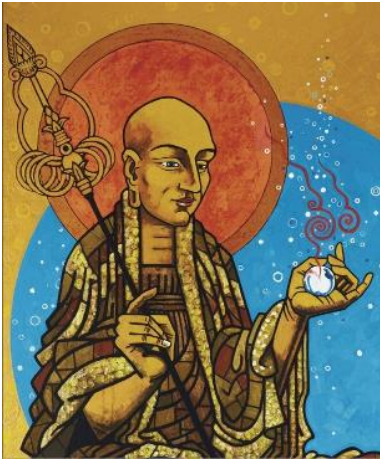


In each realm there is also a Buddha figure representing the compassion of the enlightened mind. The figures are sometimes associated with the six-syllable mantra of Avalokitesvara.

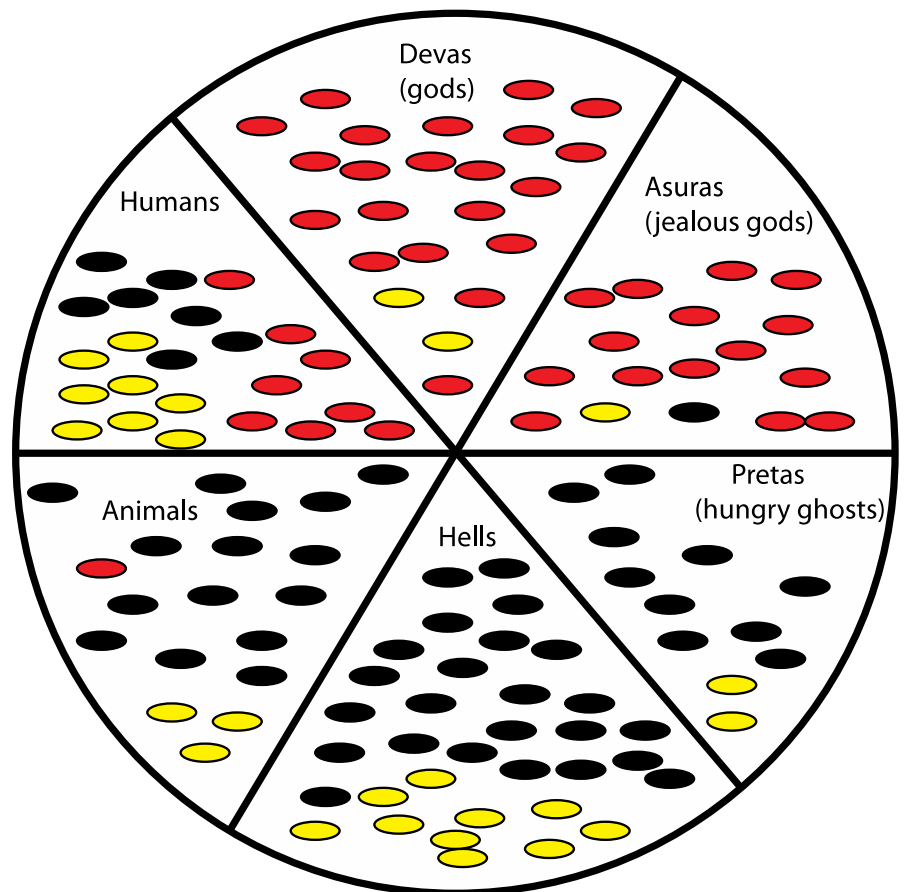
<p><b>Realm of the Gods</b> White Buddha Playing a Vina</p>	<p>In this world the figure plays a vina, a lute like instrument. When we are happy, when our sensuous pleasure is enjoyable, it is difficult to maintain mindfulness. It is particularly difficult to remember our sense of what is important and valuable. The Buddha shown uses the medium of the arts to communicate through beauty, the truth of impermanence. This is to impart a sense of urgency and awareness of reality. Complacency is the greatest danger in this abode.</p>
<p><b>Realm of the Asuras</b> Green Buddha brandishing a sword</p>	<p>This may be a surprise – a Buddha with a sword! In order to communicate the enlightened must find a point of contact. For the gods this was with beautiful music here it is with a weapon. This weapon is not for causing injury to others though; it is a sword of wisdom. If a mind is predisposed to conquering, then this trait can be turned against the forces of ignorance.</p>
<p><b>Realm of the Pretas</b> Red Buddha giving food and drink</p>	<p>To the hungry ghosts, with their huge eyes and tiny mouths, their enormous bellies and tiny thin necks, the Buddha gives wholesome food that sustains and satisfies. When we are craving for something neurotically we need something else, something that really meets a need.</p>

<b>Realm of Torments</b> Smoke-coloured Buddha offering Amrita	In the hell realms a smoke coloured Buddha pours Amrita into the mouths of the suffering. This is an ambrosial nectar so on one level it is something enjoyable and sustaining that gives respite from the suffering. Symbolically Amrita also means enlightenment itself. It may seem strange but in extreme suffering there is often a desire for complete emancipation. Beings in this state have a strong affinity with enlightenment.
<b>Realm of the Animals</b> Blue Buddha holding a book	To the animals the enlightened bring the gift of culture. This is symbolised by a book. Without culture there is no medium with which to communicate the ideas and practices of the Dharma. Culture is necessary to allow individuals to communicate, empathise and develop.
<b>Realm of the Humans</b> Saffron Coloured Buddha wearing a robe and holding a staff	In the human realm the figure is of a holy man going forth with a begging bowl and a three-ringed staff. It is the example of the Buddha himself and of the Sangha throughout the centuries. Once we have met our animal needs, achieved human consciousness and have access to culture, if we are to fulfil our potential then we must commit to developing consciousness and realising our potential for wisdom and compassion.

Here is another teaching (this particular form is Chinese rather than Tibetan). It shows the six realms as being occupied by seeds. These are of three kinds and show the potential for pleasant skilful states, unskilful unpleasant states and the potential for enlightenment.



**Kshitigarbha** – a Bodhisattva associated with helping beings who seems devoid of all hope



- Black - bad
- Red - good
- Yellow - Buddha

ॐ मणिपद्मे हूँ

OM MANI PADME HUM

Literally OM – jewel in the lotus Hung.

It is sometimes seen as the emanating of compassion to all six realms of conditioned existence.



## The Wheel, the Spiral and the Mandala: #6 this Precious Human Existence



*The human body, at peace with itself, is more precious than the rarest gem.*

*Cherish your body; it is yours this one time only.*

*The human form is won with difficulty, it is easy to lose.*

*All worldly things are brief, like lightning in the sky; this life you must know as the tiny splash of a raindrop; a thing of beauty that disappears even as it comes into being.*

*Therefore set your goal and make use of every day and night to achieve it.*

Tsongkhapa, 14<sup>th</sup> century, Tibet

Buddhism regards human existence as extremely precious and rare, providing as it does balance between joys and suffering, the potential for our awareness to awake to the realities of life, for us to positively shape our future and the future of others with skilful action; to learn through meaningful communication and culture; to transcend what is base in our natures; to embody wisdom and compassion. The rarity of this opportunity it likened to the likelihood of a blind sea turtle, rising to the surface of a world entirely covered in water only once every hundred years, surfacing with the opening of a yoke floating on the water.

Given this regard for human realm, there are many teachings urging one who would pursue the Dharma life to do so with a sense of urgency, not to fall back into complacency or be distracted by false refuges, to grasp this opportunity and make the fullest use of it. Reflecting upon these teachings and bearing them in mind can help us to keep our aspirations at the forefront of our hearts and minds.

A commonly used reflection is that of the 'Four Reminders' or the 'Four Mind Turnings', these being:



1. ***the un-satisfactoriness of samsara*** – attempting to find lasting happiness and fulfilment on the basis of the continually shifting sands of conditioned existence is futile and the cause of frustration and suffering, rather one needs to strive to comprehend the nature of reality and increasingly live in accord with it
2. ***the fact of our impermanence*** - sooner or later we will die and at such time the only thing that will matter are the qualities we have cultivated, this being the case we should make the very best use of our time through practising the Dharma
3. ***the truth of the law of karma*** - our actions of body, speech and mind shape our future, we cannot govern all of the myriad conditions that impact upon us but we *can* take responsibility for our own heart and mind, transforming greed, hatred and ignorance into wisdom and compassion

4. ***the precious opportunity that is human life*** - at this time we have a degree of health and well-being, materially our needs are supported, we live in a country that is free of war and oppression, we have friends, access to culture and the good fortune to have encountered the Dharma

*Life has inevitable difficulties, no one can control it all*

*The body is impermanent, death is certain*

*The karma I create shapes the course of my life*

*This human birth is precious, an opportunity to awaken*

*These four reminders expose my preoccupations, things that at death will mean nothing to me.*

*This life I must know as the tiny splash of a raindrop, a thing of beauty that disappears even as it comes into being*

*Therefore I recall my inspiration and aspiration, and resolve to make use of every day and night to realise it*

We need to reflect upon these truths in a way that affects all of our being, not just our intellect. We may gain an intellectual grasp of the teachings contained within the Dharma but unless we have wholehearted confidence and faith in them we will remain fundamentally unchanged. As Sangharakshita, the founder of the Triratna movement states, "the greatest challenge of the spiritual life is finding emotional equivalents for our intellectual understanding".

## The Wheel, The Spiral and the Mandala: #7 The Nidana Chain



We now come to the rim of the wheel of life. Here is a pictorial representation of a teaching that goes back to the earliest days of Buddhism: the **Twelve Nidanas** (links).

The teaching is a way of showing the most significant conditions that lead us to being born again and again in worlds of suffering.

The images are:

1. **Ignorance** – a blind man gropes along using his cane.
2. **Karmic Formations** – a potter shapes the clay on his wheel.
3. **Consciousness** – a monkey in a tree runs around in all directions
4. **Name and Form** – a boat is populated by five people one of whom thinks they are steering
5. **Six sense organs** – a house with five windows and a door



6. **Contact** – a couple embrace
7. **Feeling** – a person with an arrow in their eye
8. **Craving** – a woman offers a man a drink
9. **Grasping** – a figure plucks fruit from a tree
10. **Becoming** – a pregnant woman (sometimes depicted as a couple making love)
11. **Birth** – a woman gives birth
12. **Old Age and Death** - A corpse is carried away for disposal

On the right is a diagram showing the position of the pictures. The chain is usually seen as beginning at the top.

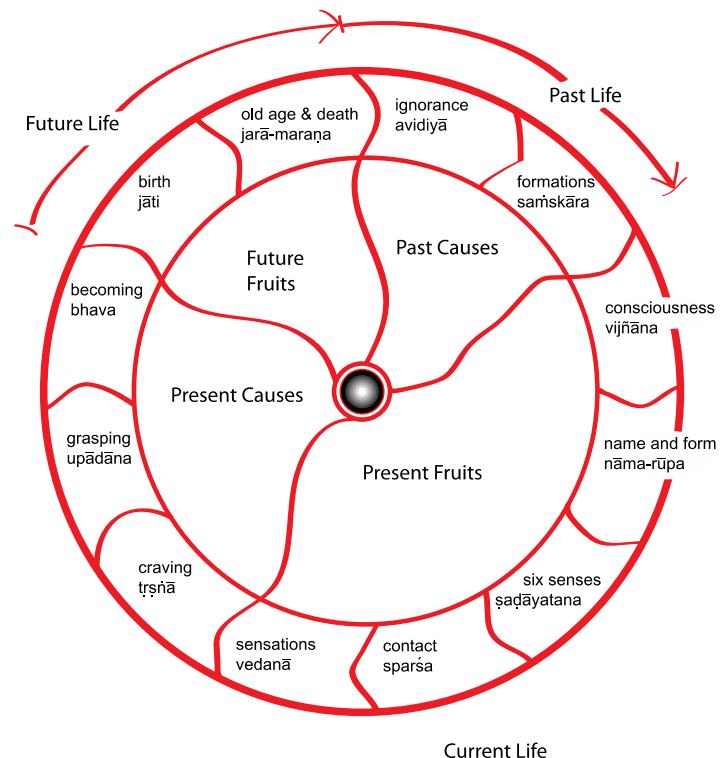
There are many ways to view this chain of events. One traditional way is to see the events as happening over three life times (as marked on the diagram). Each past life was once a future life so with a little reflection it becomes obvious that the processes for each of the three lives are happening in every lifetime.

It is also possible to see all the processes happening in the present: we are impermanent; we are born and die in every moment.

This set of teachings is complex yet has been a foundation of Buddhist reflection for over two and half thousand years.

Why reflect on this chain of conditioning factors?

- ✿ It helps us see our experience arises due to natural processes: “Why is the universe doing this to me?” type of thinking is seen through.
- ✿ We become more realistic about our control over events and experience. We can’t suddenly change everything by just wishing, but neither are we purely a victim of circumstances.
- ✿ Our actions have consequences; this strengthens our resolve to act ethically (with body speech and mind).
- ✿ It helps us to see the possibility of seeing how we can get to know the nature of the world (including ourselves) thus learning how to work with the nature of reality in order to live compassionately, effectively and meaningfully.



## The Wheel, The Spiral and the Mandala: # 8 The Nidana Chain (week 2)



Last week we introduced the twelve links in the chain of causality which run around the circumference of the wheel of life. One of the key aspects of this is described on the diagram in last week's notes in terms of *causes* and *fruits* and here we'll be exploring this in a little more detail, particularly with respect to how these links, the nidanas, relate to shaping our own future through our day to day, moment to moment choices and actions.

Another way of describing these *causes* and *fruits* phases of the Nidana chain is using the terms *action (karma)* and *result phases*. So beginning at the top of the wheel, our ignorance in the spiritual sense (see notes week 2) is the cause of us performing willed actions of body, speech and mind that lay down the pattern for who we are. These two links - *IGNORANCE > KARMIC FORMATIONS* - combine to form one of the *action phases* the chain, a phase where our actions, our choices set up the conditions for certain results.

The next five links - *CONSCIOUSNESS > NAME AND FORM > THE SIX SENSES > CONTACT > FEELING* - are the results, we can't intervene here; rather these links present a model of how, based upon our previous states of being and actions, our present self and experiences come to be. How our states of mind, the consciousness we have previously shaped, conditions the way we see ourselves, how we experience the world and the feelings that we have when we come into contact with the world on a moment to moment basis.

The relationship between *FEELING* and the next link is key to understanding the nidanas, understanding this whole image even, and can empower us to decisively change our experience of and our responses to the world, in doing so we change ourselves.

The *FEELING* link refers to what we experience when we come into contact with the events and circumstances of life, it is not about developed emotions such as love, hate, jealousy and so on, rather the raw sensations that we experience, gut-level responses if you like. For this reason the term *FEELING* can confuse things a little so this is one of those times when the traditional terms (such as with *sradha* and *dharma*) come to be used more, otherwise we can come to lose understanding in translation, the traditional term in this case is *VEDANA*.

As we come into contact with the world we experience these raw *FEELINGS*, this *VEDANA* and this experience comes in one of three forms; pleasant, unpleasant or neutral (i.e. indeterminate, neither pleasant nor unpleasant). The key thing is that this is *before* our conditioned responses kick in, our habitual patterns of thought and emotions. It may be that with our busy lives and busy minds we are quite unfamiliar with *VEDANA*, not used to taking the time to experience it, and so what happens is that we respond instantly, moving un-mindfully to the next link of the chain which is *CRAVING*, we are not in control, we have no space in which to intervene.

With *CRAVING* we have moved again to an '*action phase*', which is to say that, however much it might feel otherwise, our response to the sensations that we experience when we come into contact with the world, to the *VEDANA* we experience, is or can be, a choice. The *CRAVING* that we are concerned with here has various meanings but for the purposes of this evening we will focus on it in terms of our responses to the three kinds of *VEDANA* mentioned above. These responses relate to the hub of the wheel to the cock, the snake and the pig, to greed, hatred and ignorance.

<i>FEELING / VEDANA</i>		<i>RESPONSE</i>
Pleasant	→	Craving – pull towards
Unpleasant	→	Aversion – push away
Neutral / Indeterminate	→	Confusion

So what does this mean for us? Well this is the crux of our practice of mindfulness, in creating a more spacious and clear quality of mind where we are more in touch with our underlying feelings in response to the world and can come to observe how those *FEELINGS*, that *VEDANA* causes us to think speak and act. As we come to observe this we become, with time and patience, able to effect changes in the way that we respond, we become able to allow the moment to pass and to act with more care.

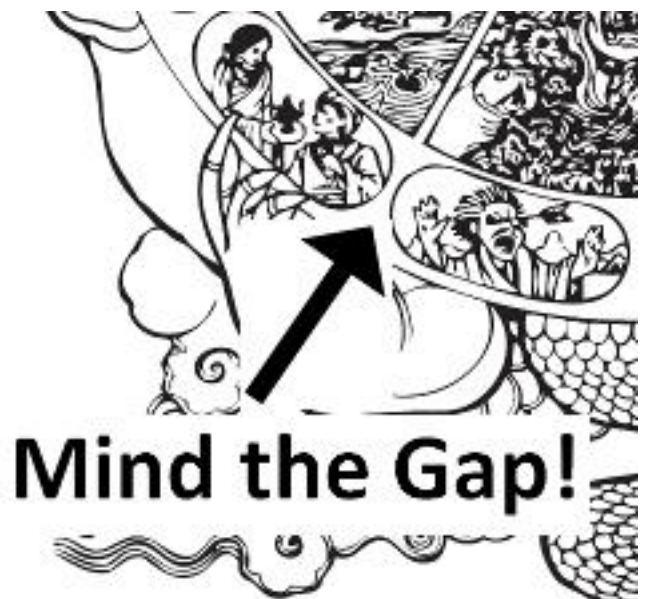
(It is also worth bearing on mind that being in touch with vedana is also important in the metta bhavana practice where we observe this with respect to ourselves and the others we include in the practice)

Some examples might be to hold our tongue when we might have spoken unskillfully, not allowing frustration to explode into anger, not slipping into consumer mode when we feel we need something to cheer us up or not getting carried away when things are going well for us and start thinking that it will all last for ever. Perhaps you can see how these relate to the states of being illustrated by the six realms?

This space between *VEDANA* and *CRAVING* is often referred to as the 'gap' and hence memorable phrases have come into use such as 'dwelling in the gap' or 'mind the gap'. What is being referred to by these is the practice of mindfulness, and one of the reasons that we pay a lot of attention to awareness of the body is that *VEDANA* is often experienced there, as tension, as a tight chest or nauseous sensation in the belly for example, so increased awareness of the body and heart-centre provides us with a very effective early warning system.

This is why mindfulness is being widely employed to positively change people's habitual patterns of behaviours in various situations such as stress, depression, addiction and so on. It is not about replacing one habitual pattern with a different one, although that may initially play a part, rather it is about creating that moment of freedom, that gap between *FEELING* and *CRAVING* within which a creative skilful response can be employed rather than a well-established and perhaps not particularly helpful habitual response.

Following on (briefly on this occasion) from *CRAVING* we have the 'action phase' links of *ATTACHMENT* - which can be regarded as 'fixing' of our relationship with our objects of craving or aversion and particularly our views about said objects – and *BECOMING*, which Sangharakshita describes as 'life or existence as conditioned by our attachment', in a sense the life we come to live based upon our responses to the world described above, here again we can reflect on the teaching of the six realms. Finally we have the 'result phase', our birth, life, decay and death in this existence and so it goes round again.... but not inevitably so as we'll see next week...





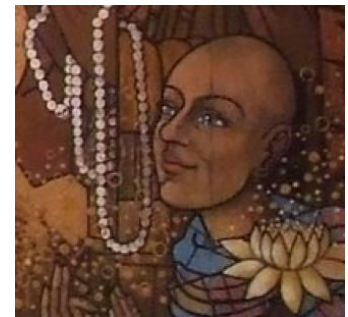
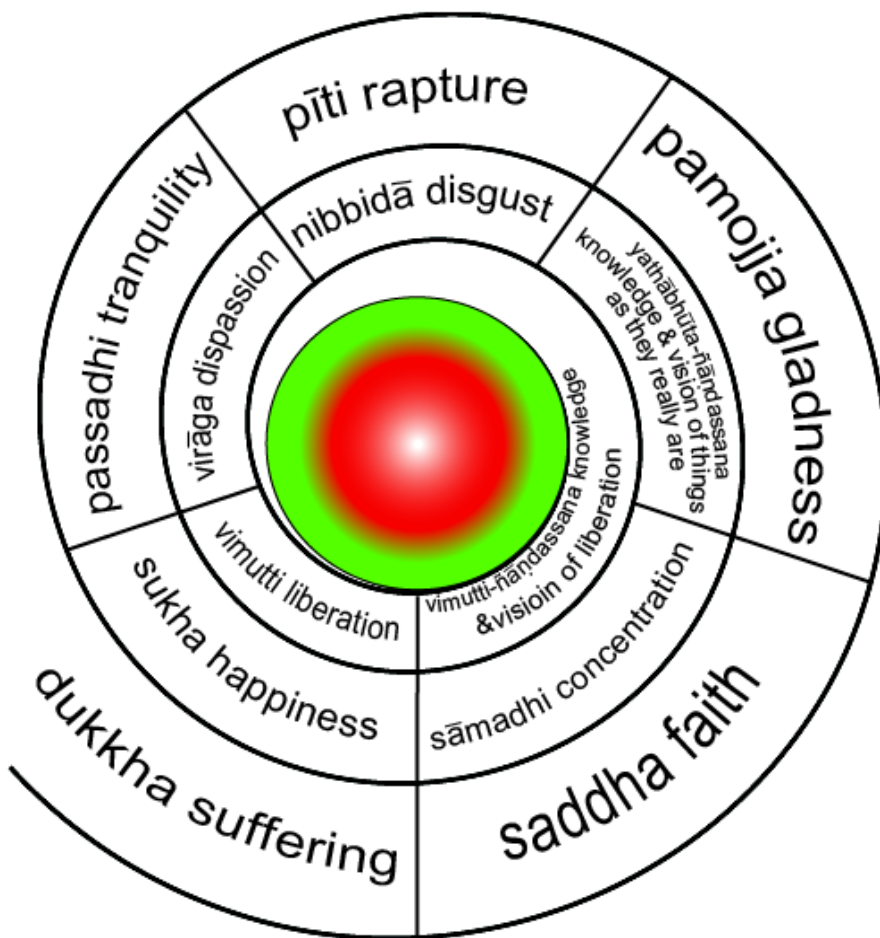
# The Wheel, The Spiral and the Mandala: #9 The Spiral



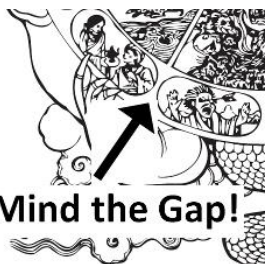
The Buddha’s vision of the world is ineffable; the closest we can conceptually get to this vision is the teaching of PAṬICCA-SAMUPPĀDA. This dynamic vision of mutually conditioning phenomena lies behind the vision of the world shown in the Wheel of Life. Although the vision of the Wheel shows godlike states, it is an inherently unsatisfying vision, where suffering is always present. In these states we constantly travel between polarised states, pain and pleasure, being ‘good’ and being heedless, being optimistic and encountering despair.

The wheel isn’t the whole of the Buddhist vision however. There is also the potential for a creative progressive mode to operate where positive states of mind support the arising of still more positive states and these give rise to others in an unfolding progressive series.

Below is another 12 link nidāna chain. This one was intuited by the bhikkhunī Dhammadinna a follower of the historical Buddha. This teaching has been given prominence in the Triratna movement leading to many people having a strong feeling of gratitude to Dhammadinna.



Dhammadinna as depicted in a triptych at the LBC



The whole process begins in ‘the gap’ between feeling and craving discussed last week.

The spiral begins with our becoming aware of suffering. It is not that suffering is great or we need to deliberately suffer! However, it is with awareness of suffering that we begin to detect the texture of reality, the nature of how things really are, rather than how we would like them to be. This sense of their being more, of potential can blossom into faith. This faith leads to a gladdening, a lifting of mood and so with the application of effort to attend to the appropriate qualities the process continues until the point where it has it’s own momentum and progress towards enlightenment is assured.

## The Wheel, The Spiral and the Mandala: # 10 Climbing the Spiral



Last week we had a look at the spiral that leads from the wheel of life through increasingly positive, creative states of being towards enlightenment. This week we will look at the early stages of this path in imagination and to some extent through actual experience.

Below are a few points that may be of interest about the nature of the spiral.

### Several Nidana Chains

You may have got the impression that the twelve link chain around the rim of the Wheel of Life and the twelve augmentative positive links of the spiral talked about last week are the only chains of conditionality mentioned in Buddhist texts. The Buddha himself sometimes talked in terms of other numbers of links and highlighted different relationships and used varying terms on separate occasions. There is, for example, a ten link reactive chain. Also, a famous teaching called the Seven Factors Of Enlightenment (Pali *-bojjhaṅgā*, Sanskrit *-bodhyanga*) is an example of a positive, creative chain of conditionality.

### Mutual Conditioning



We have become used to thinking in terms of causal relationships. He does this: it makes her do that. The rain falls therefore I get wet. Much of science is predicated on this idea and it therefore underpins most of our technological development. This way of thinking has its uses but is a simplification of how reality actually is.

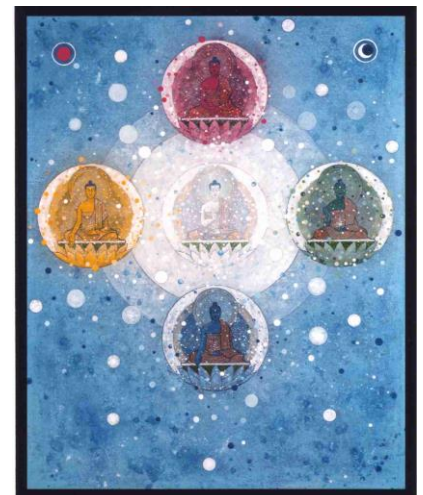
Buddhism points to a way of seeing the world where all perceived phenomena are dependant on each other as a vast web of interrelated conditions. Conditions are therefore mutually conditioning. So for example, consciousness is not self made or made by external forces but is made from the mutual conditioning of both. In the Nalakalapiyo Sutta the Buddha likened this relationship to two sheaves of cut reeds standing supporting each other. Each bundle of conditions rests on the other, the little tower of reeds needs both to remain identifiable as a standing structure.

### Stream Entry

There is a point on the spiral path where the momentum towards enlightenment is stronger than the gravitational pull towards ignorance, egotistic greed and hatred. This decisive seeing into the nature of reality and its attendant change in emotional drives is a goal short of enlightenment to which we can aspire. It is important to not try and own this 'experience'. Stream entry is a seeing through of essential selfhood, grasping this useful idea in the wrong manner reinforces a sense of self.

### More about the Spiral Path

If you want to know more about the transition from the states of mind symbolised by the Wheel to those described in the Spiral Path then there is an excellent talk by Sangharakshita (the founder of the Triratana Order and Movement) that explores this. He also explains where it fits in with other Buddhist ideas and shows its practical relevance. It is available from [FreeBuddhistAudio.com](http://FreeBuddhistAudio.com) as an audio download or pdf text and is called "Mind Reactive and Creative."



### Entering the Mandala

Next week we will begin to explore the Mandala of the five Buddhas. Colour, gesture, position and a myriad of associated symbolic features are involved in this rich image of the goal of the spiritual life.

This week we are going to start looking at what is at the top of the Spiral Path - Enlightenment. This is difficult topic because it is essentially ineffable, i.e. it is beyond the capability of words and concepts to describe. Because of this we are going to look at some of the qualities of Enlightenment as communicated / illustrated / described by the symbolism of the 'Mandala of the Five Buddhas', also known as the Five Jinas or conquerors since they have vanquished suffering. We are going to look at each of these five figures in the coming weeks but first we need to address a couple of related questions.

Isn't there just one historical Buddha?

Indeed in this era there is just one, he who was Siddhartha Gautama, although Buddhism does talk of previous Buddhas and of the Buddha yet to come – Maitreya, but that is a different topic. Mostly when we talk of different Buddha and Bodhisattva figures (some of whose mantras we have chanted at the end of classes) what we are talking about is archetypal figures, symbolic forms representative of various qualities that may communicate to us in a way that does not require and can transcend words or tightly defined concepts.

Where do these archetypal figures in Buddhism come from?

It seems that for several hundred years after the Buddha's death there were no Buddha statues or 'rupas' (form) as we know them, there were symbols of a seat where the Buddha might have sat, or feet where he walked - both indicating the physical absence of the Buddha, also the eight spoked wheel of the Dharma, stupas depicting the elements and impermanence and the Bodhi tree depicted in various ways. The Buddha was present to people the scriptures and also the lineage of teachers stretching back to those who had known him.

Sometime in this period, perhaps from the very passing of the Buddha, some people would meditate upon the Buddha himself, conjuring a personal image in their minds-eye imbued with the qualities of the Buddha, the qualities of Enlightenment. This fulfilled a need for people, to be in touch with more than just the words of the scriptures, the Dharma, and with the Sangha, but to have a strong connection with the Buddha. In this way a kind of archetypal image of the Buddha arose, not an actual historical representation for no such image exists, but an image that communicates something both of the being and his qualities.

If you have done the Metta Bhavana practice and connected sometimes with a strong sense of say, a good friend, this is an indication of the kind of felt connection that can be established by meditating, reflecting or just calling to mind an image of the Buddha. Of course it helps if we have read about the Buddha and know something of his life and teachings to inform our imagination. When we read stories from the life of the Buddha it is evident that his extraordinary presence, the presence of an Enlightened being, had an immense impact upon people who encountered him.

Why are these archetypal forms needed?

This 'felt sense' or emotional connection is *essential* if we are to undertake the Buddhist path. Like icebergs, most of *us* is below the surface, down there in our sub-conscious, not wholly responsive to intellect and logic, it is the realm of our emotions, dreams, deep longings and conditioning, of our personal myths. So if we are to truly engage with this Buddhist path, to transform ourself and transcend our conditioning we need to engage *all* of ourself and not leave the greater submerged portion behind. Engaging with symbolism, with images, myth, stories, mantras, music, poetry and so on helps us to do this. This idea does not appeal to everyone and some people, particularly Westerners it seems, prefer to keep Buddhism in a box or boxes labelled, 'philosophy', 'common sense', even 'psychology' and so on but this is not what the tradition in its entirety represents.

In time, meditation upon the Buddha developed in a way such that varied symbolism emerged to communicate different qualities of Enlightenment - wisdom, compassion, fearlessness and so on. There being many such qualities, different facets of Enlightenment, like the many surfaces of

radiant cut jewel, what happened is that different archetypal Buddha forms emerged to embody and communicate these facets. Almost like the way that pure white light is refracted through a prism enabling us to experience the beauty of the different colours that it contains.

Different people find that they connect with different of these archetypal figures as the symbolism and qualities communicates something to them and resonates with them on a deep level. Some people do not connect with any in this way but still find that having the different qualities of the Buddha refracted in such a way helps them in their appreciation and understanding of what we might perhaps call *the* Buddha, of Enlightenment. Some elements of the tradition have nothing to do with them at all. It's entirely up to the individual.

## Akshobya

The Mandala of the Five Buddhas is a collection of five archetypal figures who represent between them the qualities of Enlightenment, since we have taken time this evening with the introduction above we'll explore the mandala itself (including that term) in the coming weeks. For this week we need to move on to explore the first of the figures, Akshobya.

Each of the figures in the mandala communicates certain key aspects and numerous sub aspects through posture, hand position (mudra) and other parts of the image, in the case of Akshobya some of the keys aspects are as follows

Name – Imperturbable or Immutable, Colour – Blue, Position in the mandala – East, Element – Water, Seed syllable – Hum (symbol of the integration of the individual with the universal)

Hand position (mudra) - Earth touching. This is related to the night of the Buddha's Enlightenment and what is known as the 'attack of Mara'. Following his failed attempts to deter the Buddha from the final stages of his quest through fear and with the temptations of sensual pleasure, Mara then attempts to provoke self-doubt by asking the Buddha who he thinks *he* is to sit at the sacred spot where previous Buddhas have pursued and gained Enlightenment. The Buddha's response is to reach down and touch the earth with his fingers, calling the earth, the Earth Goddess as witness to his striving and to the qualities that he has attained through innumerable lifetimes. This image may speak to us if we are inclined to be affected by the unjust criticism of others, a reminder as it were to 'stand our ground'. This then links to the name Akshobya, imperturbable, something that is also represented by the elephants that support the lotus upon which this Buddha sits.

Wisdom - Mirror-Like. Each of the five figures represents a different facet of wisdom and in the case of Akshobya this is known as Mirror-Like wisdom. Mostly we see the world through the distorted lens of our views, opinions, prejudices and so on, our experience is subject to all of our conditioning, most of which we are not conscious of. Mirror-Like wisdom on the other hand reflects reality just as it is without distortion, like the surface of water that is absolutely still.

Resting in an upright position on Akshobya's left hand is a Vajra, the symbolism of which we'll explore more in coming weeks but suffice to say for now that it represents transformation, the transformation of negative energies into positive energies and qualities. In this case particularly it represents the transformation of relative, dualistic, limited wisdom into the absolute Mirror-Like wisdom mentioned above. (apologies but in this picture the Vajra is located on the throne – there are variations in images)



*Om Vajra Akshobya Hum*

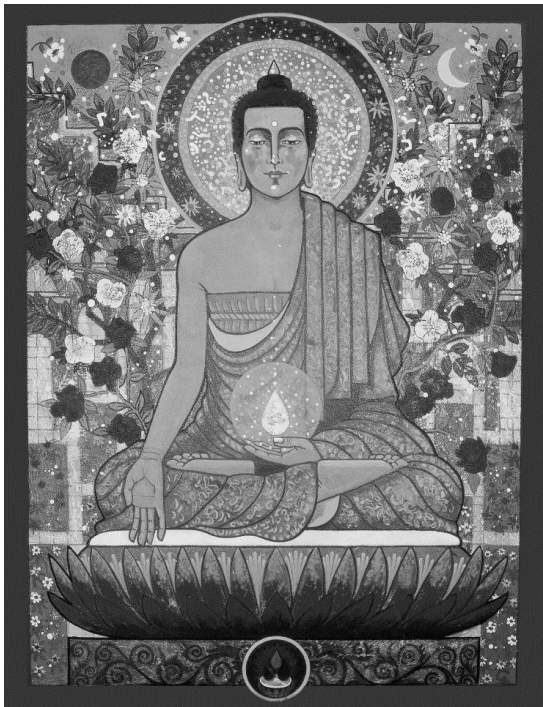


Ratnasambhava

We began our exploration of the Mandala of the Five Buddhas in the east, at dawn, with Akshobya, this week we travel to the south where beneath the midday sun in the clear blue sky we meet the golden form of Ratnasambhava, the 'jewel-born' or 'jewel-producing one.'

Ratnasambhava sits upon a moon-mat upon a lotus in an abundant garden, the gesture (mudra) made by his right hand is that of giving, the hand resting down by his right knee, palm facing us in a gesture of open handed generosity. His left hand rests on his lap and upon it rests the wish-fulfilling-jewel, the cintamani. The lotus seat, symbol of the transcendental is supported by four horses, symbolic of natural free flowing energy (not included in this image).

### Generosity and abundance



Ratnasambhava's quality of generosity points toward an open-heartedness of spirit and also the possibility of changing a feeling of lack, of never having enough into an appreciation of what we *do* have. When we are holding on tight to what we have and are focussed on what we want, this can be reflected in the way that we hold on tight to views, attitudes and to a fixed sense of self. This sets us apart from others, creating the division of I, me, mine. It is an attitude that is subtly or not so subtly founded in greed and also in a way of being that contradicts the essential teaching of the Dharma.

In contrast to this, generosity may be considered the fundamental Buddhist quality and practice, being an expression of loving-kindness and of the truth that in actuality nothing really belongs to us, put simply, giving can loosen us up. For this reason it is said that if you can do nothing else, if you are not in a position to meditate, reflect on the Dharma and so on, then just give something.

Sometimes we may feel that we can't afford to give or that we don't have anything *to* give but there is *always* something we can give to others. It may be something material or financial but equally importantly or indeed often more important, it may be a little time to listen, some kind words, some encouragement or just a little practical help. Bridging that gap that often exists between us and others is so very valuable, especially if we perhaps consider that loneliness and low self-confidence may be considered forms of poverty. If we begin to think in these terms there is an abundance of what we may give, symbolised by the garden in this image

Considering the wish-fulfilling-jewel, the cintamani, that rests upon Ratnasambhava's upturned left palm, this represents the source of this abundance, of these riches, not riches in the sense of excess material wealth but in the sense of *what will really bring happiness and well-being to ourself and others*, qualities such as wisdom, compassion, open heartedness, patience, positive energy and so on. It is for this reason that in Buddhism the Dharma is regarded as the greatest gift that one can give. In a sense these riches are not something that we can ever possess in the way that we might think we do with material things, rather we can aspire to embody them, to be a channel for them. If we start to get an inflated view of how great we are in these ways then we are back to I, me, mine again, back to grasping, away from what is represented by that open handed mudra of giving.

## Wisdom - Sameness

This brings us to the nature of the wisdom that Ratnasambhava embodies and that is the wisdom of sameness, not sameness in the sense of a bland, featureless equality, rather sameness in the sense of what we all have in common and what we have in common with all living things. All living things arise in the universe on the basis of supporting conditions and as those conditions cease they pass away, all living things are comprised of the elemental fabric of the universe which is shared and in a sense never ours, it is always part of the universe, we just borrow it for a while. All living things wish to be free from suffering, wish to be happy and to be fulfilled, whether as a human being, cocker spaniel, ladybird, oak tree and so on, this may not be a conscious urge but it is there underlying all life.

Reflecting in this way, having a glimpse of the vision and wisdom of Ratnasambhava can help us in further untangling the tight knots of self and separation, to allow us to participate in the energy of the flow of life rather than struggling to create an island of fixity within it. This is why perhaps experiencing nature can be so good for us, pointing as it does to the reality of life, we can't fix or possess it but we can aspire to become increasingly engaged with the richness and beauty of it. We might also reflect upon how it continually gives forth the means for our existence and survival, it is perhaps unsurprising that the element associated with Ratnasambhava is earth.

## Beauty and Culture

Another association of Ratnasambhava is with beauty and culture, we have begun to head in this direction above. Appreciation of beauty *is* an appreciation of life and can help us to appreciate the abundance of what we *do* have and *can* experience rather than dwelling on what we perceive that we lack. Meditation can help us with this, a calm, clear mind is able to experience more fully the richness of life around us, particularly nature and the qualities of other people, we can become more content with less (or maybe it's really more?). Similarly the metta bhavana can help to appreciate the beauty of friendship and the qualities of those around us and what we share with them.

The connection with culture lies in the fact that the arts of all kinds can in themselves embody beauty and at the same time open our eyes to new and fresh ways of seeing the world and of seeing and understanding our connection with it, our common humanity and our connection with nature. The arts can pose difficult questions that challenge us and invite us to examine and maybe broaden or relinquish our views, at the same time they enrich our lives with a sense of wonder.

*om ratnasambhava tram*

### Imagination

I want to say something this evening about imagination, everyone will have different thoughts and feelings about this term and it is important to clarify what we mean in the context of Buddhist practice. Some might have the feeling that exercising our imagination equates to fantasy, is totally unreal, a waste of time or whatever and in all probability some of it is, but we can also reflect upon how we all use our imagination in our lives.

Whenever we make a change to our life or bring something new into it the chances are that we will have used our imagination alongside other techniques such as practical analysis and our previous experience. We imagine what our life will be like if we get that new job, we imagine being with someone we are attracted to, we imagine driving that new car or what our house or garden could like if we re-design them. We might even imagine a poem, a painting or a piece of music before we create it. These are just a few examples, I am sure that you can all think of many more.

Also of course there is the way that poetry, music, literature, drama and so on inspire our imagination, when we read a book, the chances are that we are adding our own visual and aural images to the text, probably experiencing physical and emotional feelings too. When we hear the news from around the world it can affect us deeply, even without shocking images, because we imaginatively connect with the experiences of other people, we imagine, if only for a moment, ourselves or our friends and family in those situations and of course this can spur people to positive action.

So from a Buddhist perspective, imagination is a powerful force in our life and as such it can lead us into speech and action that is positive or negative, skilful or unskilful, effectively what we imagine, what we dwell upon in our minds, we become and of course this is not just a Buddhist teaching. We practise mindfulness in order that we can actually observe what is happening in our minds, to nip the unskilful in the bud and in time remove its roots. We practise the metta bhavana in order to decisively dwell upon the positive, to cultivate our relationship with positive thoughts and feelings, not ignoring the presence of the negative but acknowledging it and moving on in a way that is skilful and helpful.

So it is also with the faculty of imagination that we bring to bear when we choose to imaginatively connect with the qualities of the Enlightened mind, of the Buddha. We take the black and white text of the book as it were and imbue it with colour, vitality, physical and emotional depth. What can happen when we do this is that the Buddha becomes a living presence in our lives, a companion and a refuge, rather than some distant historical and mythical figure; we establish real felt sense of the Buddha's qualities, the qualities of both the historical Buddha and the archetypal figures. It is this this vivid, vital sense, this connection that can guide us, teach us and transform us.

### Amitabha, Buddha of Love and Compassion

This week we travel to where the sun sets into the western ocean, deep ruby red in a beautiful golden sky, this is where we find Amitabha, Buddha of Infinite Light and love. Amitabha is the deep red of the setting sun, a colour that is warmly attractive, a colour of positive emotion, of love and compassion. Just as the daytime sun is too bright for our eyes whilst the setting sun is gentle, beautiful and inviting, just so is Amitabha approachable. Amitabha's element is fire, the fire of aroused emotional energy. The red lotus upon which he sits floats upon the calm western ocean whose breadths and depths echo the infinite breadths and depths of Enlightened compassion.

These then are the qualities of Amitabha - light, compassion, warmth, love, receptivity. Being qualities of the Enlightened mind they are not limited by family, preference or friendship, rather they blaze forth for all living beings.

We have seen in previous weeks the symbolic hand gestures of each of the archetypal Buddha figures, in the case of Amitabha the gesture is perhaps that which is most familiar to us, the two hands on the lap of the figure, one resting upon the other with thumbs touching, this is the mudra of meditation. There is something about the stillness of the meditating Buddha figure that has allowed it to become quite ubiquitous in Western society, adopted by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike as a symbol of calm, inner peace, stillness, happiness even, whether people have heard Buddhist teachings or not, this image seems to be attractive and meaningful.

As the vajra is the emblem of Akshobya and the wish-fulfilling-jewel that of Ratnasambhava, the emblem of Amitabha is the lotus, a symbol of openness, gentleness and growth. The lotus seat which appears in many Buddhist images is a symbol of transcendence, lotuses grow out of the murk and mud and the bottom of a pool, often in India the pool itself is stagnant and filthy, the lotus grows up out of all of this, rising above the murk to shine forth, captivating and beautiful, it is a symbol of purity and beauty emerging from defilement.

#### Discriminating Wisdom

Amitabha's wisdom is that of discrimination, of discerning the uniqueness in everything, in everyone. When we think of other human beings we often seem to want to group them into 'this type of person' or 'that type of person', 'old people' or 'young people', 'this race' or 'that race', even 'this gender' or 'that gender' and so on. In reality every human being is unique, a complicated collection of positive and not so positive qualities. Buddhism tells us that all beings wish to be and indeed have the potential to be happy, to be free from suffering and to progress and perhaps if we were able to appreciate each other with a little more of Amitabha's wisdom we might facilitate this.



*om amideva hrih*

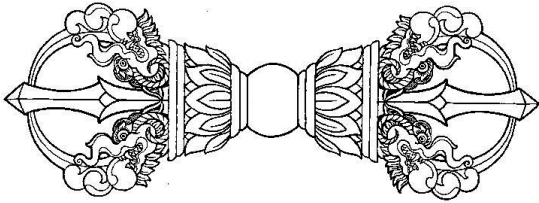
#### Note - Pure Land Buddhism

Amitabha is the pre-eminent figure in a school of Buddhism known as 'Pure Land' Buddhism which takes the view that, the path to Enlightenment being lengthy and difficult, it is wiser to call upon the compassion of Amitabha to be reborn in his 'Pure Land' where the conditions for progress are most favourable. This school is very popular in China and Japan and it is where the concept that chanting the name of Amitabha, *om namo amitabhaya buddhaya* or, in Japanese, *namu amida butsu*, is sufficient for one to be reborn in the Pure Land. For discussion at some other time perhaps...



The Vajra

We mentioned the Vajra (Tibetan Dorje), the diamond thunderbolt, briefly when looking at Akshobya and since the double Vajra is an emblem of Amoghasiddhi we need to look a little more carefully at this symbol and object.



The two ends of the Vajra represent the opposite poles of negative qualities or poisons, and wisdoms, most commonly each end has five prongs, four outer ones and the central one, these correlate as per the table below. One end of the Vajra represents the negative qualities born from ignorance that keep us spinning around the wheel of conditioned existence - samsara, and the other the wisdom that will set us free from this. The prongs

emerge from lotus flowers symbolising the emergence or growth of these two opposing aspects, of ignorance and wisdom. Where the prongs emerge from the lotuses there are the heads of a crocodile like creature known as a makaras, which, as is the often the case with amphibious creatures, serpents, dragons and so on, represent the forces of the unconscious mind.

<u>Buddha</u>	<u>Poison</u>	<u>Wisdom</u>
Akshobhya	hatred	mirror-like wisdom
Ratnasambhava	pride	wisdom of sameness
Amitabha	greed	discriminating wisdom
Amoghasiddhi	envy	all-accomplishing wisdom
Vairocana	ignorance	Dharmadhatu (sphere of the Dharma)

The lotuses themselves emerge from the central sphere which represents the mutable nature of all conditioned things, the teaching that all things arise and pass away on the basis of conditions and therefore have no essential fixed self-nature. In Buddhism this is known as emptiness (sanskrit - *sunyata*), and it is this truth that makes transformation possible, if human beings had a fixed essential nature we would not be able to change. This is not emptiness in the sense of a vacuum, of nothing being there; rather it is that all things are empty of fixed self-nature. Since there is nothing fixed, we may also consider that all is potential, potential for the arising of positive, skilful states of being and ultimately Enlightenment, and also potential for negative states and for descent into hellish states.

One way of describing Enlightenment is that it is the total and unshakeable attainment and embodiment of this truth, there are no taints, no negative qualities, and hence no sense as self as separate from other, as being apart from the entirety of existence; a Buddha is the embodiment of this reality. It is this transcendental reality (transcendental in the sense that it rises above and goes beyond conditionality) which is, perhaps paradoxically, unchanging, immutable, diamond hard and which has the power to cut or smash through the delusions of mundane reality. This is what the Vajra represents.

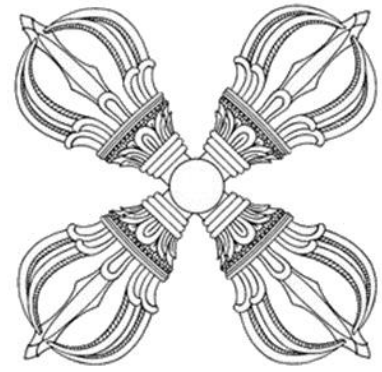
Hence as we saw three weeks back, Akshobya with his mirror-like wisdom, imperturbable, unaffected by the worldly winds (gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, fame and infamy), there is no ego-sense to be blown this way and that, changing fortunes are seen for what they are, the results of the inevitable processes of conditionality and change. So when we hold the Vajra, physically and / or as an object of reflection or ritual implement, this is the truth, the Dharma we are grasping. We are taking hold of, apprehending the truth of *sunyata* of emptiness, of change, reflecting upon the polar opposite ways in which we can respond to the world, and of the potential for transformation and transcendence, of Enlightenment.

Amoghasiddhi and the double Vajra

The double Vajra, emblem of Amoghasiddhi takes this symbolism further, adding additional dimensions. In some forms of Indian Buddhist cosmology, the whole universe rests on a double Vajra of inconceivable size, however this symbol is also considered to represent the deepest pattern of our own being. So what is being expressed here is the unity of the essential nature of all things, of consciousness and of the universe, to understand the ourselves is to understand the universe, inner

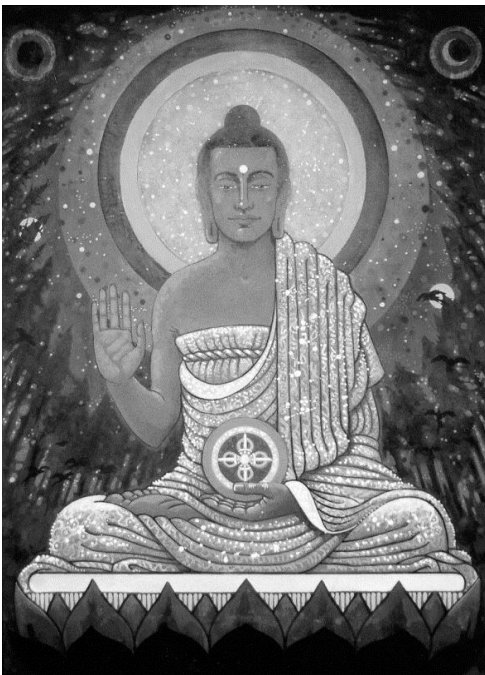
and outer reality are not different, this is one meaning of the term Tantra.

We may not be able to explore the universe but we *are* able to examine and explore all parts of our own being, to pursue and inner quest of self-knowledge, which, in its fullness, means complete integration of all parts of our being. When we have no secrets from ourselves, when we hide behind no conceits, no delusions, accepting and taking full responsibility for who we are, then we are able to rest on an entirely stable platform. There will be no vulnerabilities for the world to discover and exploit, for we will have already discovered them and understood for ourselves. This will require us to work with all parts of ourselves and not just those areas where we feel strong or comfortable. If we are truly to cultivate the stability of the double Vajra we need also to address those areas where we feel uncomfortable, less strong and afraid.



## Fearlessness

The quality of fearlessness, *abhaya*, is represented by the right hand of Amoghasiddhi held up palm towards us in what is known as the *abhaya mudra*. What we have mentioned above, the quest to fully explore, discover and integrate all aspects of our own nature requires this quality and is also the path toward it. The journey will take us into challenging territory and we must be prepared to let go of views and ideas about the world and ourselves in order to allow fresh insights to arise, we will need to be courageous. The more that we come to know and acknowledge ourselves and the nature of reality, the less we will have to fear. As the universe rests upon the infinitely stable and immutable basis of the double Vajra so can we, it is from this basis that the quality of fearlessness embodied by Amoghasiddhi arises.



## Amoghasiddhi - Unobstructed Success

Having travelled via the east, south and west at dawn, noon and sunset respectively, we encounter Amoghasiddhi in the north beneath the night sky, appearing within the darkness that might otherwise make us fearful, with a gentle green glow of calm and reassurance. The name Amoghasiddhi means 'unobstructed success' and the wisdom associated with this figure is known as 'all accomplishing'. Amoghasiddhi very much exemplifies the active aspects of Enlightenment, responding to the needs of the world, moving in any and all directions through his associated element air, unencumbered by a sense of self as separate from 'other'.

We may have a sense of this when we respond spontaneously to the needs of others, those occasions where our plans and preferences are laid aside without a second thought and we find ourselves acting with surprising energy and clarity, strength even. Somehow when we get 'ourselves' out of the way some other quality and energy can work through us; this can feel like a sense of freedom. We also hear of this kind of response associated with emergencies and dire need, where the very best in people is apparent and our faith in humanity is strengthened. Interestingly, with mindfulness, we might begin to note that sometimes our initial response to need is of this nature but our mind then follows this with a series of 'buts....' as if the ego has had a chance to kick in and reassert itself.

Amoghasiddhi embodies this energy that can challenge the powerful elements of negativity in the world where a more subtle response may be brushed aside or ignored. The realm of the wheel of life with which Amoghasiddhi is associated is that of the Jealous Gods, the Asuras or Titans, powerful and competitive who need to be countered with confidence and fearlessness.

## The Wheel, The Spiral and the Mandala: #15 The Mandala of the Five Buddhas

Having travelled around the circumference of the mandala, exploring the qualities and symbolism of the four previous archetypal Buddhas we now head to the centre to encounter Vairocana.

Akshobya with his mirror-like wisdom indicated to us that we need to go beyond the views and preferences of our own ego bound nature in order to see with clarity, his earth touching mudra reminding us that we need to trust in the truth of our own experience. As we begin to encounter the world more directly and vividly we may be fortunate to encounter the beauty, abundance and generosity of Ratnasambhava, to experience other people and the natural world in a way that illustrates to us the essential unity in the nature of all things. This will be an affirming and positive experience which will aid the opening of our hearts and the springing forth of compassion for all that lives, the radiant love and compassion of Amitabha, able to appreciate the unique qualities of all individual phenomena, proceeding from the peace and stillness of meditation. So far, so very good, but the world will still challenge us greatly, tempting us perhaps to retreat to our old head-in-the-sand ways, our inner journey of discovery and integration may have a similar effect, we will undoubtedly need at times to find within us the fearlessness and energy of Amoghasiddhi. Likewise his symbol of the double vajra, of progression from a stable basis, bringing all parts of ourselves on the journey, identifying and working on our weaknesses rather than just playing to our strengths.

### Vairocana, the Illuminator

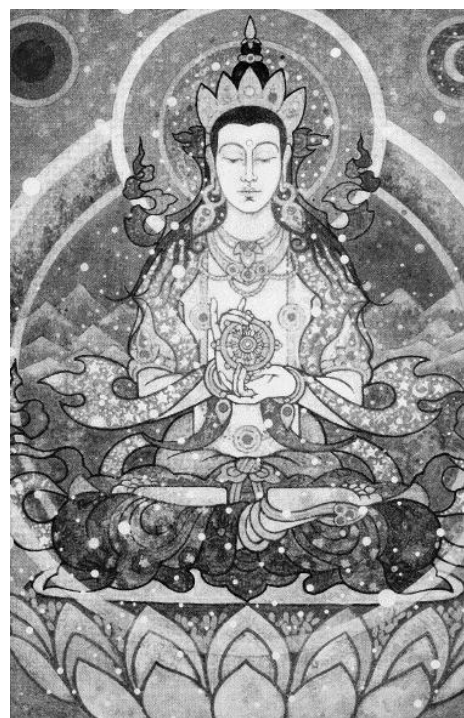
At the centre of the mandala is Vairocana whose name means 'the illuminator', and whose colour is white, the brilliant white of sun reflecting upon snow. We have previously mentioned the simile of white light refracted through a prism, allowing us to see the various colours that it contains, in the Buddha mandala, Vairocana is the source of this white light. As white light contains all of the colours refracted from it, so Vairocana's wisdom encompasses that of the four archetypal Buddha's we have previously examined. His wisdom is known as Dharmadhatu, the sphere or realm of the Dharma, the underlying purity of mind, when all taints, all limitations have been removed, free of subject - object, self - other duality, it is all encompassing, without limitation in any direction (Vairocana's element is space), hence the spherical analogy. It is the deepest, most pure state of consciousness, the mind of one who is fully awake, Buddha mind.

The symbol associated with Vairocana is the wheel which he holds in his hands, turning it with a gesture known as 'turning the Wheel of the Dharma'. The symbol of the wheel has three particular associations in this context.

Firstly it is associated with the Dharmachakra, the Wheel of the Dharma, an eight spoked wheel, the spokes representing the limbs of the Eightfold Noble Path of Buddhist practice. At the hub of the wheel there are often three coloured segments, yellow, blue and red, representing the Three Jewels to which Buddhists Go for Refuge, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha respectively.

The Buddha's first teaching following his Enlightenment took place in the deer park at Sarnath and is known as the 'First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma', recorded in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (link below). We have mentioned previously that the term Dharma refers both to the teaching of the Buddha and also to the nature of reality to which it pertains, the symbol of the wheel held and turned by Vairocana represents both. In plunging deeply into the Buddha's teaching, our objective is to realise for ourselves the true nature of reality.

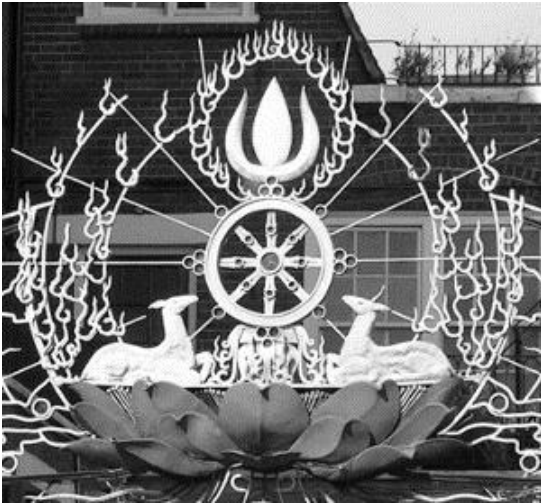
[www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html](http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html)



*Om Vairochana Hum*

This quality of teaching, of communication, of illumination, is not something to be viewed from afar though, rather, like the other qualities symbolised by the mandala, it is something for us to cultivate in ourselves. This does not necessarily mean that we have to have a great deal of detailed knowledge of Buddhism, it can mean for instance, that in practising meditation and beginning to orient our lives toward the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, that we communicate something to others simply through our own choices and actions and the positive effect that they have upon us.

A further note on this association with the Buddha's teaching is that of the lions which are the animal associated with Vairocana, their roar being the loudest of all creatures, the Buddha's communication being the most significant we may hear is known as 'the lion's roar'.



Another association of the wheel is within kingship, this stems from Indian culture at the time of the Buddha and the concept of the 'Wheel Turning Monarch'. There are numerous references in Buddhism to the attainment of an Enlightened one being greater than that of a worldly monarch. A king's attributes are dependent upon wealth and typically power over others, power usually attained and maintained through force, yet for all this a king may live in fear that all will be lost to someone more powerful or cunning and is therefore never at peace. A Buddha however has no need of all this to be perfectly happy, to be wise and to be of benefit to the world, furthermore, what the Buddha has attained is attained through personal effort.

*Though one should conquer in battle thousands upon thousands of men, yet he who conquers himself is (truly) the greatest in battle. It is indeed better to conquer oneself than to conquer other people. Dhammapada verses 103 and 104*

There are examples of countries being ruled according to Buddhist principles, the most famous perhaps being the reign of Ashoka in India who turned away from violence and strived to rule in this way as evidenced by the columns still existing on which are inscribed guidance for living this way. Other examples include Tibet at certain times in its history and possibly current day Ladakh where 'gross national happiness' is reportedly considered more important a measure than 'gross national product'.

The third association that we can make with the wheel is that of a solar symbol, spokes emanating from the centre as do the rays of the sun. The sun of course is absolutely essential to all life on Earth, it lies at the centre of our existence, our days and seasons revolve around it and because of this it has been ever present in the mythical and spiritual life of humanity. It's a lovely feeling to just bask in the sun's light and warmth after a cold dark winter and we can relate this feeling to the light and warmth that the Dharma provides, light which illuminates the more confusing and sometimes scary corners of our life, and the warmth of metta, of loving-kindness and compassion which we can discover and cultivate within ourselves.

It is appropriate then that this symbol should be central to the mandala of the five Buddhas as the sun is central to our solar system. For a Buddhist, the spiritual radiance that emanates from the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha becomes central to one's own personal mandala and ever more pervasive as we progressively allow it to infuse all elements of our life, it is the sun at the centre of our own solar system, without which life at its richest and most fulfilling cannot exist. This being the case, the Buddha becomes the refuge to which we turn hence the most fundamental expression of the Buddhist.

*Buddham saranam gacchāmi* - to the Buddha I go for my Refuge  
*Dhammam saranam gacchāmi* - to the Dharma I go for my Refuge  
*Sangham saranam gacchāmi* - to the Sangha I go for my Refuge